

Whistle Stop Inn

4200 West Irving Park Road

Preliminary Staff Summary of Information

Submitted to the
Commission on Chicago Landmarks
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WHISTLE STOP INN
4200 West Irving Park Road
Chicago, Illinois

Architect: Unknown

Date: 1889

Lost amidst the clamorous commercial strip along Irving Park Road and overwhelmed by the steel and concrete superstructure of the Kennedy Expressway is a small frame building recalling the character of the Irving Park community a century ago. Although the current occupant, the Whistle Stop Inn, is of recent vintage, the building itself is the oldest mercantile structure in the Irving Park community, dating from 1889, the year the area was annexed to the city. Remodeled extensively over the years, the exterior of the building has been recently reconstructed to simulate its appearance a century ago, the facade suggesting the late nineteenth-century origins of the community.

Irving Park as a Nineteenth-Century Railroad Suburb

A neighborhood of Chicago since 1889, Irving Park began as an outlying suburb, sustained by its connection with the city via the Chicago & North Western Railway. In this regard, the community was similar to a number of other "railroad suburbs," such as Evanston, Oak Park, Austin, Rogers Park, Edgebrook, and others, which proffered a serene and pastoral alternative to the congestion of the city. In her article Suburb Into Neighborhood: The Transformation of Urban Identity on Chicago's Periphery--Irving Park as a Case Study, 1870-1910, Professor Barbara Posadas notes a distinction between working-class suburbs and railroad suburbs; Irving Park exemplifies the latter:

The second form of suburbia, more remote from the city, was dependent on rail service as the only easy, public access to Chicago. Settlements radiated from the commuter stations. By day, the householders of those outposts were more uniformly employed "downtown," content in the belief that their families enjoyed privacy and security in large homes on tree-shaded lots, protected from the sights, smells, sounds, and dangers of Chicago. The homes of those suburbanites remained physically isolated--by distance and by intervening stretches of farmland--even after annexation.

In contrast to the dense development within the city, large detached single-family homes predominated in the commuter suburbs. The relaxed quality of these areas was further reinforced by the pictorial detailing of houses which included wrap-around porches, gables, turrets, and bays. The distance of these settlements from the central business district allowed businessmen and professionals to commute into the city for their livelihood and retreat to the comparative calm of the suburbs.

Irving Park was one of a number of villages within the larger Jefferson Township. The township, which was organized in 1850, included all of present-day Chicago north of North Avenue and west of Western Avenue. From the time of the earliest settlement of the area in the 1830s through the 1850s, the overwhelming majority of landowners had been involved in agriculture. During the 1850s, however, the growth of Chicago created a demand for residential real estate affecting not only the city but outlying areas. Movement away from the city, toward Jefferson Township, was facilitated by the construction of the Wisconsin Division of the Chicago & North Western Railway, which diagonally bisected the community. By 1870 the township population was 1,813, and less than half of the township's households were by then engaged in agriculture, an increasing number of residents working either in newly established local factories or downtown. Records also indicate that eighty-seven percent of property owners in Jefferson Township in 1870 were non-residents, suggesting the speculative character of real estate interests poised for residential development.

The growth of the village of Irving Park was typical of those along the Chicago & North Western right-of-way within Jefferson Township, including Maplewood, Grayland, and Montrose. In 1869, Charles T. Race, his son Richard T. Race, Adelbert E. Brown, and others purchased property previously used as farmland in the area bounded approximately by Montrose Avenue, Pulaski Road, Grace Street, and Kostner Avenue. With an eye toward residential development, the owners subdivided their property and made arrangements with the Chicago & North Western for scheduled train service. The area was christened Irving Park, in honor of Washington Irving whose stories, including Rip Van Winkle and The Legend of Sleepy Hollow, were American favorites. The developers reinforced the idyllic character of the setting by their selection of names such as Rutledge, Greenwood, Prescott, and St. Charles for area streets.

The development was well received, judging from Everett Chamberlain's commentary in 1874 in Chicago and Its Suburbs:

The impression which the visitor to Irving Park receives, on landing at the station of the Northwestern road, is an exceedingly pleasant one....Standing upon the platform of the station...he takes in at a glance of the eye some sixty houses of unexceptionally neat pattern, and almost endless variety. The most conspicuous are those of Mr. Charles T. Race...and that of the heirs of J.S. Brown, one of the early proprietors who died lately. Both these houses are of large size, of the Italian villa style of architecture, and, as to material, of red brick.

The most prominent structures were located on Irving (now Keeler) and St. Charles (Kedvale) avenues on either side of Irving Park Road. Some of the homes of the era still survive interspersed throughout the community, including the Stephen A. Race House (ca. 1873-74; 3945 N. Tripp Ave.; designated a Chicago Landmark in 1988), Charles N. Loucks

House (1889; 3926 N. Keeler Ave.), and the Ropp-Grabill House (ca. 1871; 4132 N. Keeler Avenue).

Chamberlain noted that the proximity of the area to the Loop via both the Chicago & North Western and the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul railways, as well as by carriage, was a major asset to the popularity of the community. Noted also was the supply of artesian water furnished to all households. According to Chamberlain:

These advantages, coupled with a remarkably pushing policy, have enabled the Races and those associated with them, to populate their village with surprising rapidity and enormous profit to themselves within the short period of four years, one of which was seriously cut into by the great conflagration. Some estimate of the profits may be formed from the fact that the average cost of each acre sold in 1869 is now being got back six times over, in every lot 50 x 150 odd feet sold by the proprietors.

The Race family marketed Irving Park property aggressively, running advertisements in Chicago newspapers describing features that are every bit as appealing 120 years later: "money to loan for building purposes at Irving Park" and "shady streets, fine schools, churches, and stores."

There were few businesses in the suburb, most of them serving the domestic needs of area homeowners. The first store was a two-story brick structure built in 1870 by Charles Race at Irving Park Road and Kedvale Avenue. By 1886, the Jefferson Township directory listed approximately a dozen firms in Irving Park, including a drug store, two groceries, a blacksmith shop, a coal and wood supplier, and a saloon.

Nichols & Son Grocery

The structure housing the current Whistle Stop Inn was built in 1889 by Henry E. Nichols for his grocery business. Nichols purchased the lot at the northwest corner of Irving Park Road and Keeler Avenue and adjoining tracts to the west for \$750 in 1881. By the end of the decade property values had risen dramatically, and in 1889, Nichols took out a \$3,200 mortgage with a building and loan association for the corner property only, to build the present structure. The 1890 Lakeside Directory for Chicago directory lists Henry Nichols of "Nichols & Son, grocers" at the intersection.

In terms of architectural design, the simple two-story frame structure of the Nichols grocery store building evokes images of generic Western saloon architecture by the boxiness of the overall form, rather than the more sophisticated masonry commercial blocks constructed in the Loop during the previous decade. In its original configuration the store was distinguished by the fineness of its details. The structure was built as a store with an upstairs apartment typically occupied by the owner. The first-floor storefront was

delicately proportioned, the facade opened up with wide expanses of plate glass framed by thin wood members. Above the two display windows were large multi-paned transoms. The entrance to the store was recessed and centered between two display windows, and a separate entrance for the upstairs apartment was adjacent to the shopfront to the west.

The second floor had five window groupings, a double window and tripartite opening along Irving Park and three double windows on the Keeler Avenue elevation. The windows, with the exception of the fixed central pane of the larger tripartite grouping, were double-hung sash with multi-paned transoms above. The window frames were elaborately treated, made up of combinations of decorative stock millwork, including profiled window casings, cap moldings, and corner, base, and plinth blocks. Above the windows was a beaded board fascia to which were attached pairs of scrolled brackets which in turn supported a projecting wood cornice. A balustrade of turned wood posts capped the building. Overall, the design had a rustic quality consistent with its outlying location.

Nichols operated the store for a brief period before selling the property and grocery business to David D. Mee in August 1890. Mee was previously the operator of a coal yard at Irving Park Road and Kedvale Avenue. The drastic jump in community property values was reflected in the price of the property. Where, in 1880, Nichols had bought the corner lot and two adjoining parcels for \$750, nine years later he sold the corner lot alone for \$6,000, plus the \$2,200 balance on the building and loan note. Among the contract terms between Nichols and Mee were stipulations that Mee convey to Nichols property he owned in Lake County, Indiana; sell Nichols his house and property on Keeler Avenue for \$1,800; and transfer to Nichols ownership of a sorrel mare.

Mee owned the grocery only eighteen months before selling the property to Fred A. Brown who continued the grocery business. According to research by the Irving Park Historical Society, during part of the period of Mee's and Brown's ownership, from 1891 to 1894, the store was the location of the Irving Park Road toll gate. In 1903, druggist William H. Brown bought the property for his business.

From Suburb to Neighborhood: Irving Park, 1889-1920

The construction of the store coincided with the annexation of Irving Park to the city of Chicago. Throughout the mid- and late-1880s, the city carried on an aggressive annexation campaign that culminated on June 29, 1889 with the annexations of adjoining areas, including Jefferson and Lake townships, Lakeview, Hyde Park, and other smaller communities. Overall, 120 additional square miles were brought under the control of Chicago, more than tripling the size of the city in one day. Contrary to current-day conceptions, the annexation of these communities was in large part amicable as suburbanites valued

proposed municipal improvements of services such as water and sanitation, and police and fire protection.

Annexation itself appears to have had little effect on Irving Park socially. Like many railroad communities during the late nineteenth century, Irving Park was a stable, homogeneous community. Research by Professor Posadas found that in 1880 more than sixty percent of area residents were employed in non-manual jobs and that more than three-quarters of the heads of households were native-born. According to Professor Posadas:

The community captured by the federal census of 1900, though larger, closely resembled that of the 1880 suburb in occupation and ethnicity. In both years approximately 60 percent of the householders held white-collar positions; fewer than 10 percent worked at unskilled or semi-skilled jobs. Census data from 1900 reflected the same characteristics found twenty years before.

A major reason for the stability of the area over the years was the presence of a variety of social and religious institutions.

The community maintained its physical appearance as well, the secluded residential character still predominating at the turn of the century. The mansions along Irving Park Road, especially that of R.T. Race, dominated the streetscape.

It was with extensions of transportation lines from the city, beginning around 1900, that marked changes, particularly in local real estate development, began to appear. More modest homes on lots in new, less expensive subdivisions were sold, and multi-unit apartment buildings were introduced into the landscape. Between 1895 and 1914, more than 5,000 new residential structures, including more than 1,200 multi-family buildings after 1905, filled in most of the remaining building lots. Commercial development along the major thoroughfares kept pace with residential construction, and by 1920 dominated streets once lined with the mansions of the founding families of the community. By 1920, much of the commercial architecture still seen in Irving Park had been built in a manner reflecting the largely undistinguished character of commercial strip architecture.

Alterations to the Nichols & Son Grocery

The intense development of Irving Park Road had a deleterious effect on the original design of the former Nichols & Son Grocery. From 1903 until at least 1920 the building was occupied by a drug store, and for a brief period, from 1911 to 1912, the store was the temporary location of the community library. Physical alterations to the building were minimal, as indicated by a photograph taken along Irving Park Road in 1911. By that time, the rooftop balustrade had been removed and the store entrance relocated from the center of the building to the corner. The view also shows that the scale and

material of the adjoining commercial structures on Irving Park was more compatible with the former grocery than it is today.

As the community moved away from its autonomous suburban identity, unsympathetic alterations were wrought on older buildings, stripping them of much of their historic character. Changes to the former Nichols & Son Grocery typify the character of these transformations. Some time after the 1911 photograph of the building, its original window and door openings were radically changed. The double windows were replaced by smaller single window units and the projecting tripartite window was replaced by a double window flush with the facing of the building. The original siding was apparently retained, the area around the new smaller openings filled in with new siding. Still later, the building was resurfaced with asphalt siding on top of the original clapboarding.

Within the last three years the building has undergone changes of an opposite character, meant to replicate the historic character of the original building. The current owner has recently completed a reconstruction of the exterior, based on a photograph of the original design. As part of the reconstruction effort most of the original remaining material, including the wood clapboarding, was removed. On the second floor, window openings and casings were remade, as was the balustrade that topped the building. The original storefront configuration was followed in general form on the first floor, but significantly modified in materials and proportions.

Although the "new" Whistle Stop Inn suggests the changes both the street and the community have undergone over the past century, it cannot be called a restoration. Changes of the degree of those to the former grocery store are not reversible--due to the removal and destruction of original fabric--and are therefore not restorable. By the broadest interpretation of accepted preservation guidelines, the building cannot be considered a historic property. Nonetheless, the resulting building provides a colorful historic reference to the streetscape which is a highlight to the community.

OPPOSITE:

The structure housing the Whistle Stop Inn has been located at the northwest corner of Irving Park Road and Keeler Avenue for a century, its setting changed considerably by the character of early- to mid-twentieth century improvements.

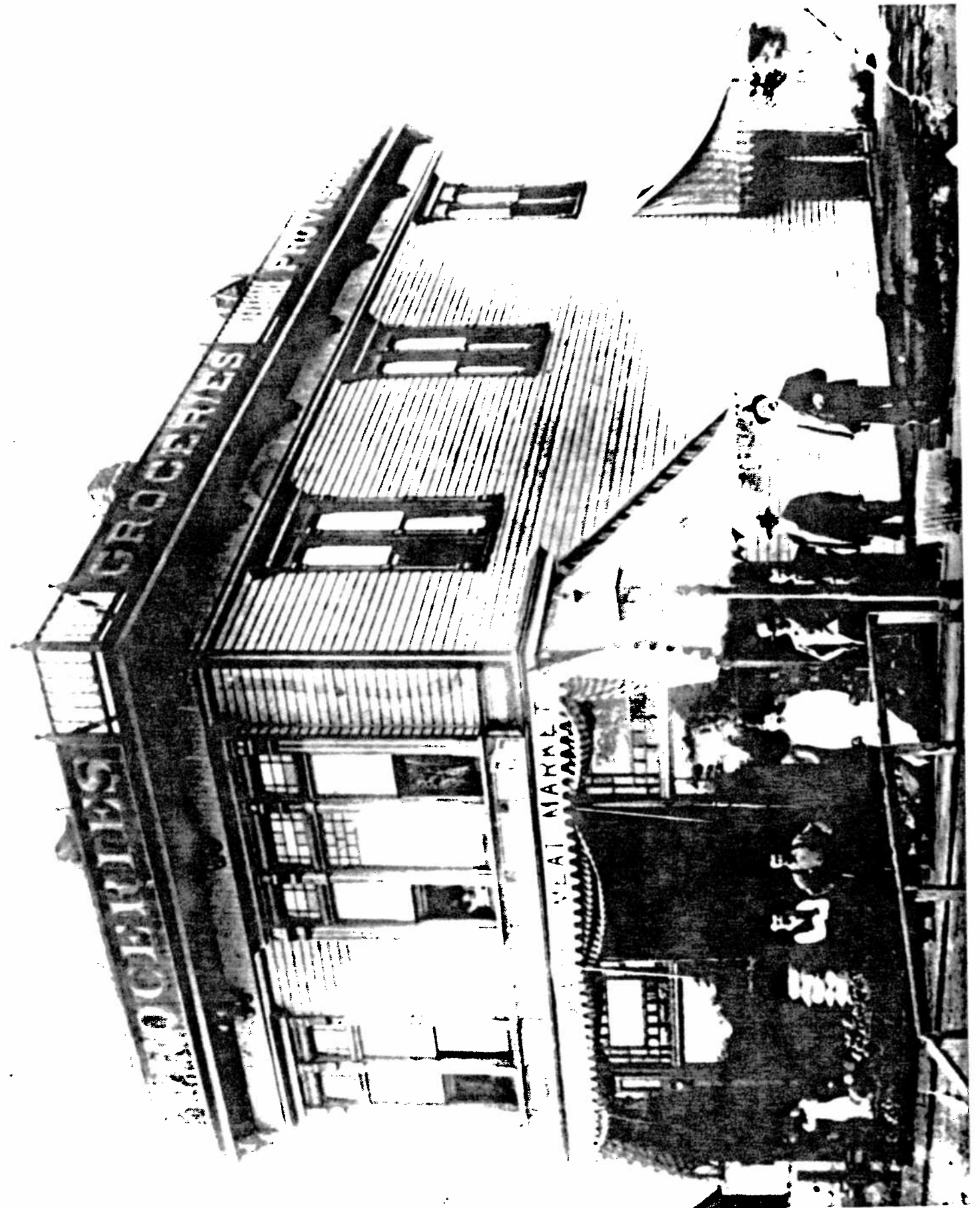
(Bob Begolka, Photographer)



OPPOSITE:

Built as the Nichols & Son Grocery in 1889, the store was sold to David D. Mee who occupied it in 1891 when this photograph was taken.

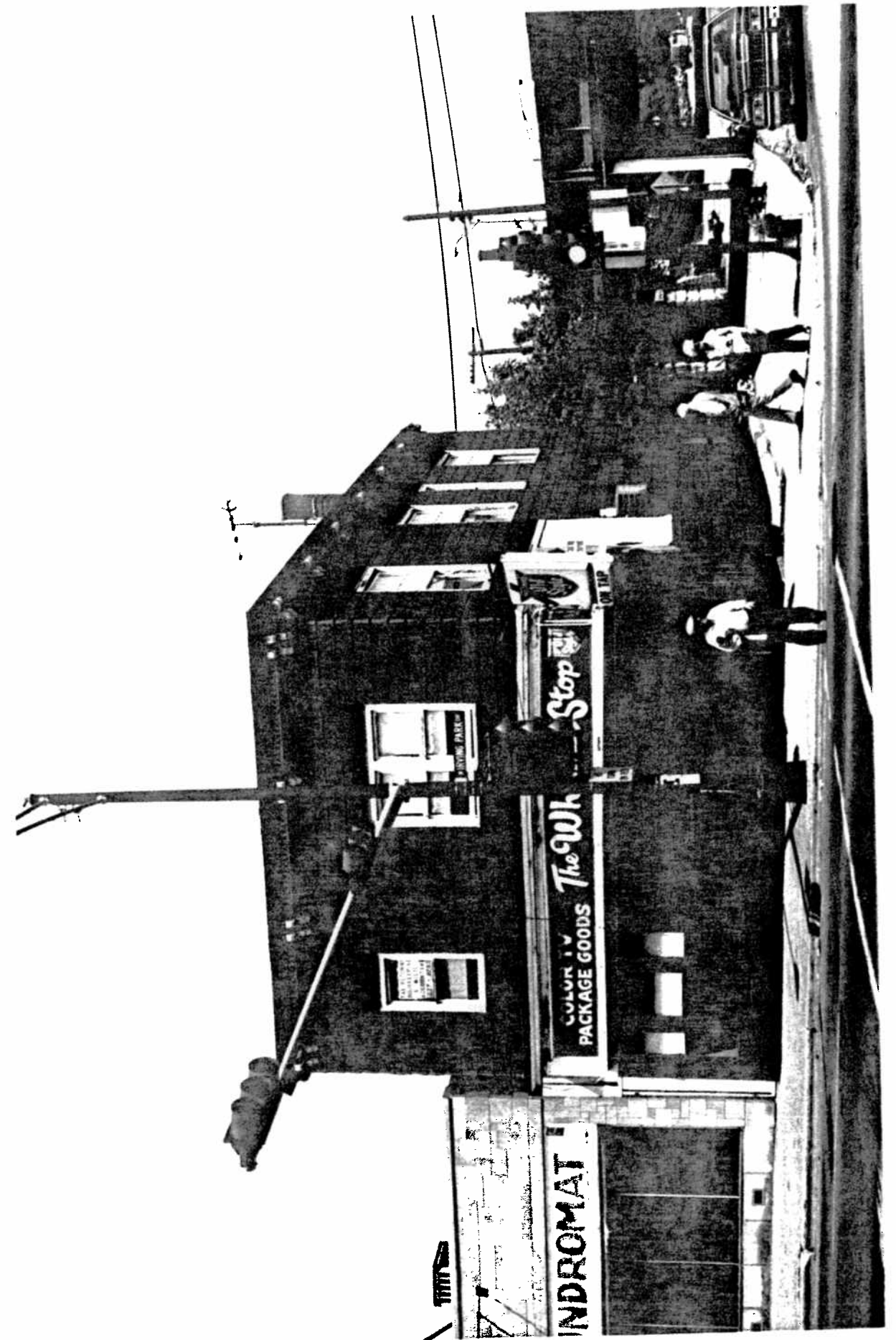
(Photograph courtesy of the Irving Park Historical Society)



OPPOSITE:

The building was considerably changed over the years. Alterations included moving the storefront entrance from the center to the corner; replacing the original windows with smaller ones; removing the top balustrade; and re-siding the building with asphalt sheets.

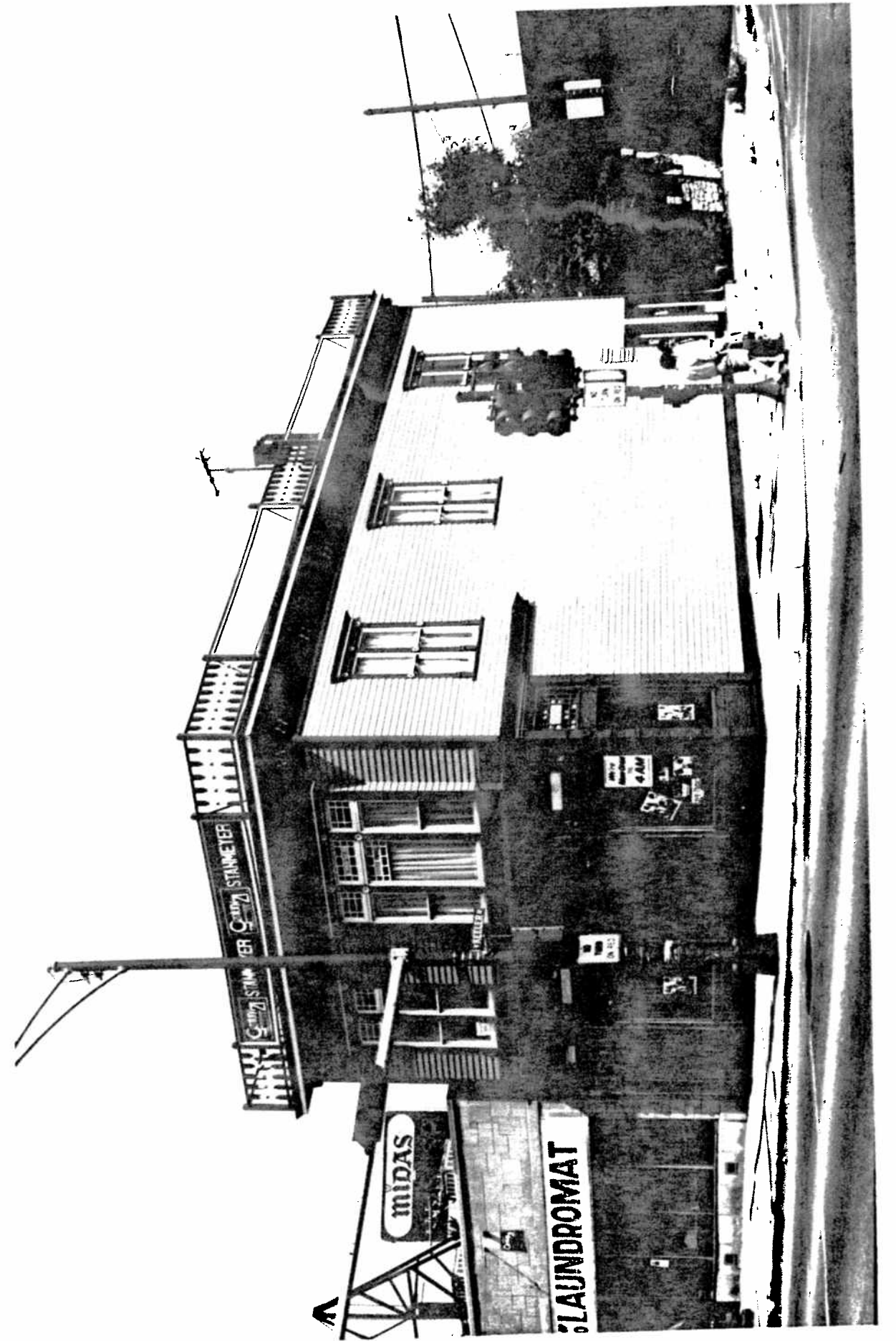
(Bob Begolka, photographer)



OPPOSITE:

Since 1986, the present owner has attempted to reconstruct the building to its historic form by re-siding the building with wood clapboard and by fabricating details for the second-floor windows and first-floor storefront that approximate the original design.

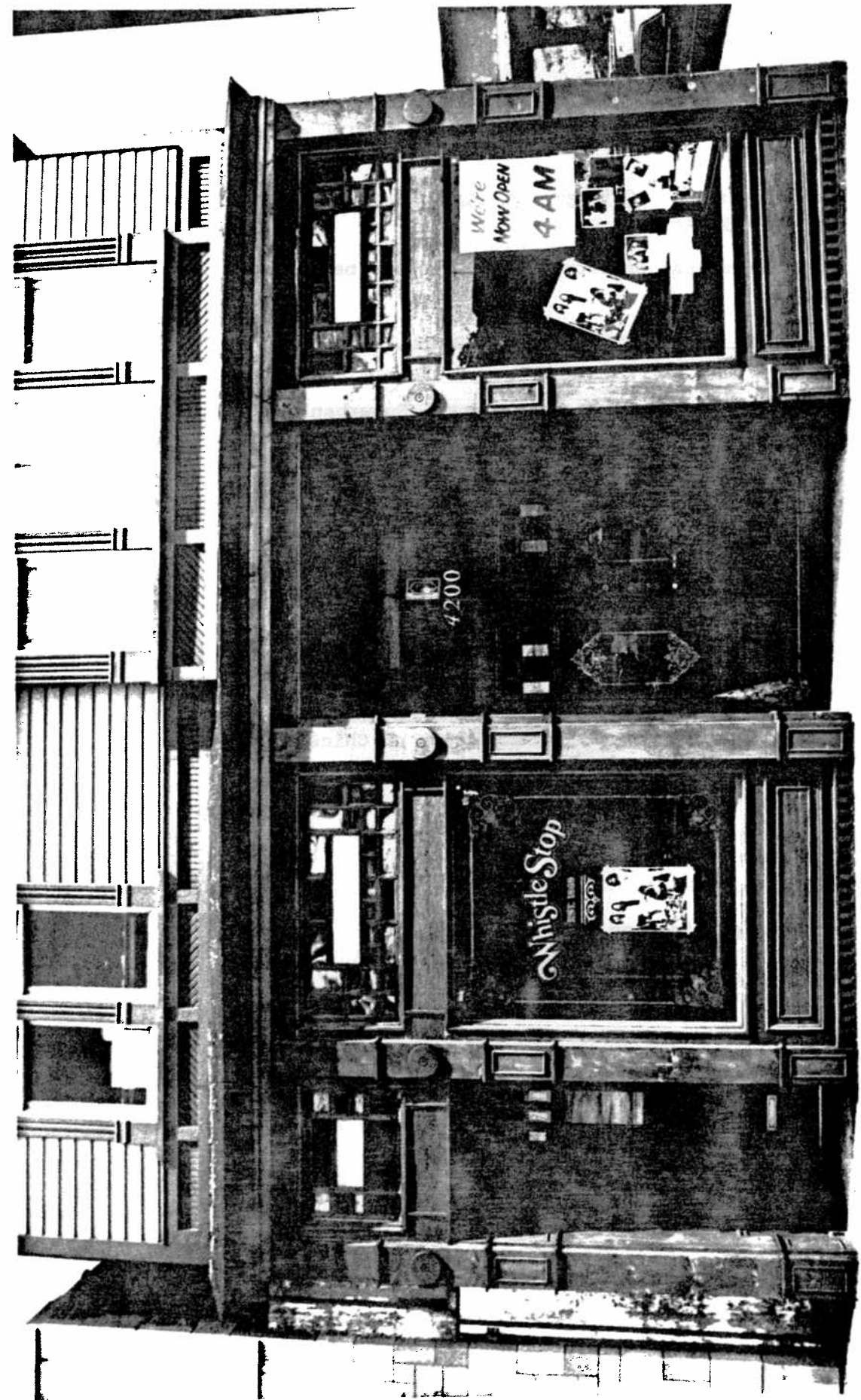
(Bob Begolka, photographer)



OPPOSITE:

View of the reconstructed storefront.

(Bob Begolka, photographer)



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Additional research materials used in the preparation of this report is on file at the office of the Commission on Chicago Landmarks.

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